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AUTHOR	Denton, David R.
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ABSTRACT

This report describes the progress that the 16 states in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) region have made in meeting the first of the Goals for Education 2000: that all children will be ready for first grade. The report describes SREB states' efforts in: (1) increasing the percentage of at-risk children served by prekindergarten and kindergarten programs; (2) providing programs and services to support preschool children and their families; (3) assessing all children's readiness before the beginning of first grade; (4) establishing programs in 100 percent of the districts to help children who are not ready for first grade; and (5) providing programs to meet children's needs for other types of care. Among the major findings are the following: The number of children served in state-funded prekindergarten programs increased from 80,000 children in 1989 to more than 400,000 children in 2000, more than the number served by Head Start. In seven SREB states, the number of children served by Head Start and state programs equals or exceeds the number of children in poverty. From 1989 to 2000, the number of SREB states requiring kindergarten increased from 5 to all 16. Every state has a reading initiative that helps schools identify first graders needing additional help. Thirteen SREB states have immunization rates equal to or higher than the national average. Every SREB state has a federally approved plan to reduce the number of children without health insurance. The report concludes by asserting that although much has been done to prepare children for school, many needs remain. (Contains 18 references.) (KB)

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Southern Regional Education Board

592 10th St. N.W.
Atlanta, GA 30318
(404) 875-9211
www.sreb.org

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SREB States Lead the Way:

Getting Children Ready for the First Grade

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Goals for Education: Challenge 2000

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All children will be ready for first grade.

Student achievement for elementary and secondary students will be at national levels or higher.

The school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half.

90 percent of adults will have a high school diploma or its equivalent.

Four of every five students entering college will be ready to begin college-level work.

Significant gains will be achieved in the mathematics, sciences and communications competencies of vocational education students.

The percentage of adults who have attended college or earned two-year, four-year and graduate degrees will be at the national averages or higher.

The quality and effectiveness of all colleges and universities will be regularly assessed, with particular emphasis on the performance of undergraduate students.

All institutions that prepare teachers will have effective teacher-education programs that place primary emphasis on the knowledge and performance of graduates.

All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity demonstrated by results.

Salaries for teachers and faculty will be competitive in the marketplace, will reach important benchmarks and will be linked to performance measures and standards.

States will maintain or increase the proportion of state tax dollars for schools and colleges while emphasizing funding aimed at raising quality and productivity.

The SREB Commission for Educational Quality, 1988

READINESS FOR SCHOOL

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All children will be ready for first grade.

- ***Preschool and kindergarten programs are a wise investment, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.***
- ***The needs of preschool children should be determined using formal and informal assessments.***
- ***Helping all children be ready for the first grade is not just a challenge for the educational system.***

SREB Goals for Education, 1988

Children begin learning long before they enter school. Many children must overcome serious obstacles to develop the skills they will need in first grade. These facts are far more widely understood and accepted today than they were a decade ago. SREB states have become national leaders in implementing programs to help prepare children for first grade.

- Six SREB states funded prekindergarten programs in 1989. Combined, these programs served 80,000 children. In 2000, 14 of the 16 SREB states have prekindergarten programs. They serve more than 400,000 children.
- State-funded preschool programs serve more children in the SREB region than does Head Start.
- In seven SREB states, the total number of children served by Head Start and state programs equals or exceeds the number of children who live in poverty.
- Only five SREB states required school systems to offer kindergarten in 1972. Every state requires kindergarten in 2000, and nine make attendance mandatory.
- Every SREB state has a reading initiative that helps schools to identify first-graders who are struggling and to intervene to correct those problems.
- Thirteen SREB states have immunization rates equal to or higher than the national average.
- Every SREB state has a federally approved plan to reduce the number of children without health insurance.

The SREB states' efforts to help prepare children for school — and schools for all children — are impressive. The job, however, is far from done. In six SREB states, the numbers of children served by Head Start and state preschool programs still are less than two-thirds the numbers of 3- and 4-year-olds living in poverty. Five states do not pay for full-day kindergarten in public schools. Seven states do not require all children to attend kindergarten. Every state needs to take more actions to make sure that every school is prepared to help children

overcome reading problems. More than 20 percent of the region's 3-year-olds have not received all recommended immunizations. Children who are not immunized are at a much greater risk of preventable diseases that can harm them physically and can affect their academic performance by keeping them out of school and causing them to fall behind.

Achieving the goal of school readiness is complex. More and more children are coming to kindergarten without basic knowledge (such as what a word is) and basic skills (such as how to hold a book). There are many possible causes. The most obvious in the public's mind is the number of teenage mothers who lack spouses, jobs, education and parenting skills. Yet assigning blame does not relieve us of the responsibility to help prepare those children for school. Research shows that virtually all children can learn — and can learn at high levels. Educators need to believe this fact. They also should have the necessary skills and resources to help children overcome the barriers to learning that exist before formal schooling begins and can jeopardize children's health and lives.

Mark Musick
SREB President

SREB States Lead the Way: Getting Children Ready for the First Grade

The SREB states have made significant progress toward preparing all children for first grade. In 1972 only five SREB states required school systems to offer kindergarten. By 1989, every state in the SREB region did.

In 1980 only three SREB states provided any funding for prekindergarten programs. By 1989 six states funded prekindergarten programs. They served 80,000 children. In 2000, 14 of the 16 SREB states fund prekindergarten programs that reach more than 400,000 children.

Progress in preparing children for school is not limited to prekindergarten. All SREB states have established initiatives to identify children with reading problems and to intervene early to correct those problems. The SREB region also consistently exceeds the national average in the percentage of children who have received recommended vaccinations. Every SREB state has developed a plan to expand health insurance for children. Many SREB states also have developed or adopted programs to help parents be more effective as their children's first teachers.

Most states are expanding school readiness programs or considering doing so. These advances are important, but still more must be done if all children in the SREB region are to be ready for school when they enter first grade. The Southern Regional Education Board seeks to report objectively on the progress that has been made and the work that lies ahead.

Increase the percentage of "at-risk" children served by prekindergarten and kindergarten programs

Prekindergarten programs

The SREB region has led the nation in developing prekindergarten programs to improve children's readiness for school. Fourteen SREB states fund efforts to increase the number of children served by quality preschool programs. (See the program listing on page 10.)

The 14 states will spend nearly $900 million and serve more than 400,000 children in 1999-2000. More children in SREB states are served by state preschool programs than by Head Start, which reaches another 300,000 children regionwide. Texas and Georgia lead the nation in the numbers of children served. In seven SREB states — Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, North

This report was prepared by David R. Denton, SREB director of health and human services.

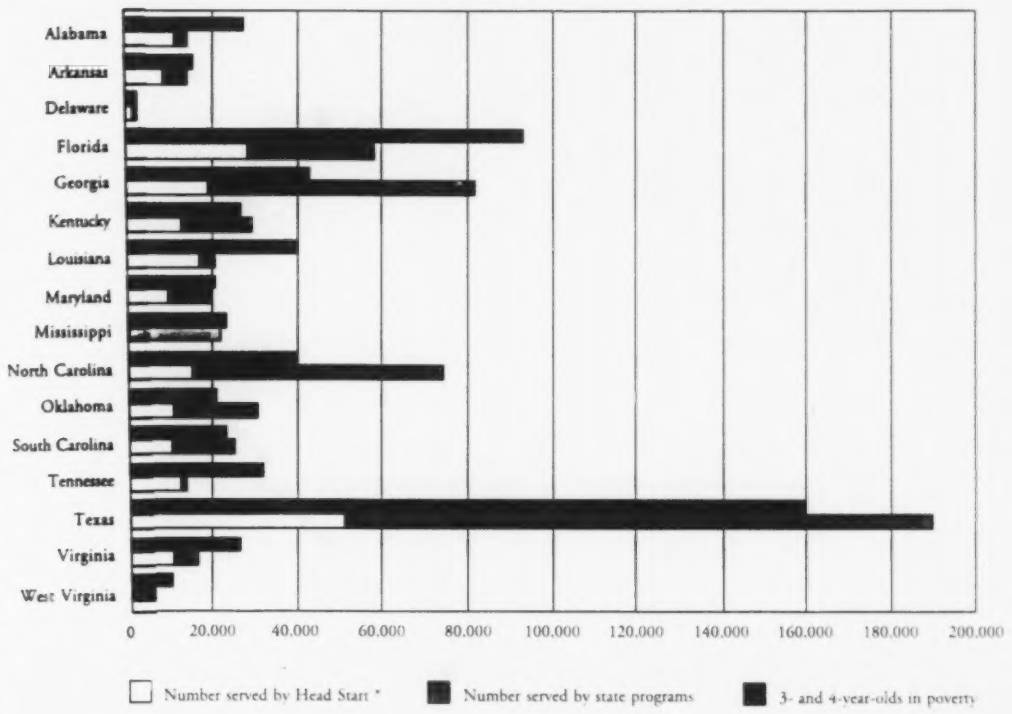
Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas — the total numbers of 3- and 4-year-olds served by state programs and Head Start combined equal or exceed the numbers of 3- and 4-year-olds whose family incomes are below the poverty level. (Figure 1)

Preschool programs vary considerably among states. (The 1999 report *Pre-kindergarten and Parent Support Programs in SREB States* describes in detail each state's programs.)

State programs differ in the following significant areas:

- program eligibility and number of children served;
- definition of at-risk children;
- standards for program staff;
- funding sources and allocation procedures;
- organizations eligible to provide services; and
- required hours of operation.

Figure 1
3- and 4-year-olds in Poverty and Served by Head Start and State Programs in SREB States, 1999-2000



Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, state program officials.

* Head Start enrollment estimates are based on 1997-98 figures.

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Both Georgia's 4-year-old prekindergarten program and Oklahoma's early childhood 4-year-old program originally targeted only at-risk children but later opened to all 4-year-olds. North Carolina's Smart Start program is designed to improve the availability and quality of child care for all children age 5 and under. Most other programs target either 4-year-olds or 3- and 4-year-olds who are "at-risk."

States define "at-risk" in different ways. Some states allow local authorities to define "at-risk." Others focus on measures of poverty, such as eligibility for Head Start or for the federal program that provides free or reduced-price school lunches. Other states target specific groups they deem to be especially at-risk: children of parents with low education levels; children for whom English is a second language; homeless children; children of migrant workers.

States also vary in the qualifications they expect of staff at preschools. Nine states require preschool teachers to be certified in early childhood and/or elementary education. Most others require either teacher certification or completion of training for the Child Development Associate (CDA, administered by the National Association for the Education of Young Children) or similar credential. Ten states require at least one staff member for every 10 children, a level that is consistent with nationally recommended staffing levels. Virginia requires a ratio of 1-to-8 in its preschool program.

States' methods of distributing funds to preschools and their requirements for the types of organizations that can provide services also vary. (Figure 2) Eight states give preschool funds directly to local school systems. Seven of those states allow the school systems to offer services or to establish contracts with other providers in the community, but in Louisiana the schools are required to operate preschool programs. Two states give funds to community agencies, which may offer services or establish contracts, and four make grants directly to individual preschool programs. All states that give funds directly to providers base funding on competitive grant applications. All but one of those that give the funds to school systems use some formula based on population and/or a measure of need (such as eligibility for free lunches).

Florida and Georgia use proceeds from their state lotteries to pay for the services provided by their prekindergarten programs. In Florida, general revenues cover the state's administrative costs for the program. In Georgia, lottery funds cover all administrative costs, but the Office of School Readiness also distributes federal funds for nutrition programs and receives general revenues to pay for licensing child-care centers. (The Office of School Readiness licenses all child-care centers that participate in the prekindergarten program; child-care providers that do not participate in the prekindergarten program are licensed by the Department of Human Resources.)

Of the 14 SREB states with preschool programs, nine allow private, for-profit child-care providers to participate. These providers are required to meet state standards for child-care licensing and/or supplemental standards for the preschool programs. When private providers are allowed to participate in programs, complaints about unfair competition from public programs are less likely. There also is evidence in both Georgia and North Carolina that including private providers can promote improvements in the quality of child care for all children.

Figure 2
Funding of State Preschool Programs, 1999-2000

	Funds go to individual programs	Funds go to school systems	Funds go to community agencies	Funding by competitive grant applications	Funding by formula	Funded from lottery proceeds	Private providers eligible
Alabama			+	+			
Arkansas	+			+			+
Delaware	+			+			+
Florida		+			+	+	
Georgia	+			+		+	+
Kentucky		+			+		
Louisiana		+		+			
Maryland		+			+		+
Mississippi		no direct funding					
North Carolina			+		+		+
Oklahoma *		+			+		+
South Carolina		+			+		+
Tennessee	+			+			
Texas		+			+		+
Virginia		+			+		+
West Virginia		no direct funding					

* Oklahoma's Head Start Supplement funding goes directly to established Head Start Programs.

Source: State program officials.

State per-child funding for prekindergarten programs varies significantly — from $1,150 per child in Arkansas to $5,170 per child in Tennessee. The differences can be attributed partly to different operating hours. Twelve SREB states specify the minimum number of hours that programs must operate. Five states — Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas — require programs to operate at least 2 1/2 or three hours per day; per-child funding in these states averages $1,848. Six states — Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee and Virginia — require programs to operate at least 5 1/2 hours per day. Per-child funding in these states generally is higher than in states that require only half-day programs; the average per-child funding for these six states is $3,167.

Delaware requires pre-kindergarten programs to operate four hours a day; its per-child funding ($4,470) is second only to Tennessee's ($5,170). Both of these programs are small, serving fewer than 1,000 children — and

administrative costs per child may be higher than for larger programs. Other causes for cost differences among states may be the distributions of urban and rural programs, requirements for local matching funds, and the different levels of nonacademic support services that programs are required to provide for families.

Don't forget kindergarten!

Prekindergarten programs received most of policy-makers' attention in the 1990s. However, any effort to prepare children for first grade needs to recognize kindergarten as an equally important piece of the puzzle. In 1972 only five SREB states (Florida, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia) made voluntary kindergarten available to all children. By 1989, all SREB states required public school systems to provide kindergarten; six states required attendance in either a public or private program. Today, nine SREB states require children to attend kindergarten. (Figure 3)

Figure 3
Kindergarten Policies in the SREB States, 1999-2000

	Full-day	Half-day	Full- or Half-day (local option)	Attendance Mandatory
Alabama	+			
Arkansas	+			+
Delaware		+		+
Florida	+			+
Georgia	+			
Kentucky		+		
Louisiana	+			
Maryland		+		+
Mississippi	+			
North Carolina	+			
Oklahoma *		+		+
South Carolina	+			+
Tennessee		+		+
Texas			+	
Virginia			+	+
West Virginia	+			+

* In 1999, the Oklahoma legislature passed legislation requiring full-day kindergarten but did not provide funding to implement it.

Sources: Council of Chief State School Officers and state program officials.

In 1999-2000, nine SREB states — up from four in 1989 — require school systems to offer full-day kindergarten. Two others give school systems the option of offering either half- or full-day kindergarten, and the other five SREB states fund only half-day programs.

The issue of full-day vs. half-day kindergarten is important when school readiness efforts are viewed as a system of building blocks. Research clearly has shown that *continuity is vital for children and that any gains from early intervention programs can be lost quickly if they are not reinforced regularly and frequently.* The most effective way to ensure that the benefits of a good prekindergarten program for 4-year-olds are not lost is to follow that experience with full-day kindergarten. Full-day kindergarten builds upon the groundwork laid in prekindergarten and prepares children for the full-day first grade that comes next. The experience of South Carolina, which recently began offering full-day kindergarten, is worth noting. (See page 12.)

Provide programs and services to support preschool children and their families

Preschool programs are not the only efforts states have made to help improve children's readiness for school. The SREB states together spend more than $50 million a year on programs to support parents and families. These programs include parent education programs such as HIPPY (Home Instructional Program for Preschool Youngsters) and Parents as Teachers. (See page 14.)

The Kentucky Family Resource and Youth Services Centers program is one of the most important state programs to support children and families. With annual funding of about $40 million, the program serves almost 1,000 of Kentucky's 1,300 schools through 600 Family Resource Centers (elementary schools), Youth Services Centers (middle and high schools) and combined centers. The centers receive relatively modest grants each year of $10,000 to $90,000, based on the number of students in each school who are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches. The legislation that created the program said the centers were designed "to improve academic performance by removing barriers to learning and to identify, coordinate and use community resources to help children succeed in school."

The centers can provide services to family members of all ages, and the services vary widely, depending on local needs. These centers are required to: address the need for child care for 2- and 3-year-olds and after-school care for 4- to 12-year-olds; provide parenting education and adult literacy programs; provide training and support for child-care providers; and help families obtain basic health-care services. The centers actually provide even more services, however. They often help families with transportation problems, maintain banks of clothing for children, hold health fairs, sponsor student clubs and provide curriculum guides for parents.

When the Family Resource/Youth Services Centers were created as part of the Kentucky Educational Reform Act of 1990, even supporters expected them to be highly controversial. Today, they enjoy broad support from both political parties. State policy-makers describe the centers as "universally accepted" and "the most popular part of KERA" and say that the centers "have made the most difference of any of part KERA."

Inspired by the Kentucky program's success, Tennessee established its own Family Resource Centers program in 1993. The

State-funded Preschool Programs in SREB States, 1999-2000

State	Program	State Funding	Children Served
Alabama	The **Alabama Preschool Collaboration Project** is a pilot program that provides grants to local agencies to serve at-risk children age 4 and under.	$300,000	150
Arkansas	**Arkansas Better Chance** (ABC) supports preschool programs and home-based HIPPY (Home Instructional Program for Preschool Youngsters) programs for at-risk children age 4 and under and for eligible 5-year-olds who are not in kindergarten.	$6 million	5,200*
Delaware	The **Early Childhood Assistance Program** supports preschool programs for 4-year-olds who are eligible for Head Start but are not being served by that program.	$3.8 million	850
Florida	The **Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program** supports pre-school programs for at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds. The Migrant Prekindergarten Program supplements the federal Title 1 pre-kindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-old children of migrant laborers.	$100.3 million	30,700
Georgia	The **Georgia 4-year-old Prekindergarten Program** makes preschool available to all 4-year-olds in the state.	$224 million	62,500
Kentucky	The **Kentucky Preschool Program** supports preschool programs for at-risk 4-year-olds and for 3- and 4-year-olds with developmental problems or disabilities, regardless of family income.	$44.6 million	15,500
Louisiana	The **Preschool Block Grant** program supports preschool programs for at-risk 4-year-olds.	$6.7 million	2,600
Maryland	The **Extended Elementary Education Program** supports preschool	$19.3 million	11,000

	programs for at-risk 4-year-olds.		
Mississippi	A proposal to create a state preschool program is being considered during the 2000 legislative session.		
North Carolina	The **Smart Start** initiative provides communities with funds to improve children's readiness for school; 70 percent of funds must be used to improve the quality and availability of child care.	$220 million	100,000
Oklahoma	The **Early Childhood 4-year-old Program** supports preschool programs for all 4-year-olds. The **Head Start Supplement** program provides existing Head Start programs with funds to increase their capacity and hours of operation.	$40 million	20,400
South Carolina	The **Early Childhood Program** provides preschool for at-risk 4-year-olds.	$23.2 million	16,500
Tennessee	The **Early Childhood Pilot Program** supports preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds who are eligible for Head Start but are not being served by that program.	$3.1 million	600
Texas	The **Public School Prekindergarten** program provides preschool for at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds.	$172 million	138,500
Virginia	The **Virginia Preschool Initiative** provides preschool for at-risk 4-year-olds.	$19.2 million	5,900
West Virginia	Local school districts are authorized to provide preschool using existing state funds for education; a proposal to establish a statewide preschool program is being considered during the 2000 legislative session.		

* Children served are for 1998-99.

Source: State agencies

Prekindergarten and Full-Day Kindergarten in South Carolina

Two state-funded programs in South Carolina are making strides in preparing all young children for school.

South Carolina in 1984 became one of the first SREB states to offer state-funded prekindergarten. The Early Childhood Program provides local school systems with funds to offer programs for at-risk 4-year-olds (defined as children with "academic difficulties" or children for whom English is a second language). The programs must operate at least 2 1/2 hours per day, five days per week, during the school year. A state appropriation of $23.2 million in 1999-2000 supports programs that together serve more than 16,500 children. Each school receives funding based on the number of children whose scores on the state readiness assessment indicate they are "not ready" for first grade.

South Carolina was the first SREB state to require all children entering school to take a readiness assessment, and it still is the only state that has consistent, long-term data on student readiness. The assessment first was administered in fall 1980, when only 64 percent of all children tested were ready for first grade. By 1984, when the 4-year-old prekindergarten began, 72 percent tested were ready. That figure rose to 75 percent in 1987, declined for several years and again reached 72 percent in 1995.

In 1996-97 the General Assembly provided funding to establish full-day kindergarten for about one-third of students. Funding increased in each of the next two years. In 1998-99 all children had access to full-day kindergarten, and 96 percent of all kindergartners were enrolled in the full-day program.

In fall 1997 — the first year after full-day kindergarten was available — the assessment indicated that 80 percent were ready for first grade, up from 76 percent in 1996. In fall 1998, 81 percent of children were ready for first grade, according to the assessment, and that figure rose three percentage points to 84 percent in fall 1999. State education officials credit the introduction of full-day kindergarten with the increase in students who are prepared for first grade. They point to the fact that students from low-income families had the biggest gains in readiness following the introduction of full-day kindergarten. Between 1995 and 1999, the passing rate among students eligible for free lunches rose from 59 percent to 77 percent, and the passing rate among African-American students rose from 61 percent to 77 percent.

South Carolina has offered full-day kindergarten for only four years, but the gains on the state readiness test are encouraging. Many kindergartners — particularly those considered at-risk — also will have been served either by the state's prekindergarten program or by Head Start. In fact, the combined number of children served by these two programs substantially exceeds the number of 4-year-olds who live in poverty in South Carolina. Prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten appear to be making the difference in getting the state's at-risk children ready for first grade.

Tennessee program, which is modeled closely after the Kentucky program, is smaller, and average funding per center is about half the level in Kentucky. In 1999-2000 there are 104 centers operating with total state funding of $3.5 million. Program officials say that interest in the centers far exceeds the number that current funding can support.

Florida designates $3 million in state lottery proceeds for the Florida First Start Program, which has Parent Resource Centers in about a third of the state's school districts. Compared with the Kentucky and Tennessee centers, these centers have a somewhat more limited scope. The Florida centers focus on providing parenting support, assessing the development of children through age 3 (or age 4 if they are not enrolled in preschool), and helping families locate resources in the community.

Assess all children's readiness before the beginning of first grade

Georgia and South Carolina are the only SREB states that have attempted to use statewide assessments to determine whether children are ready for school. Since 1980, South Carolina has required all children entering first grade, whether in public or private school, to take the same readiness test. The state is developing a new assessment that will measure overall readiness and provide teachers with more useful information about students' individual needs.

In the early 1990s, Georgia began requiring all children entering kindergarten to take a readiness test, but statewide results have not been reported regularly. The original test was replaced in 1998-99 by the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program, which is intended to provide information on overall readiness and on students' individual instructional needs.

Other states have attempted less formal assessments of trends in school readiness. For example, some ask schools to assess children's readiness by whatever means they deem appropriate and then report the results to the state. This approach makes it difficult to interpret statewide results because local standards vary.

The most important developments related to testing children's readiness for school have resulted from increased attention to children's early reading achievement. Eleven SREB states have developed early reading assessments and/or have identified lists of approved assessments. These assessments typically are given to all children either in the last half of the kindergarten year or at the beginning of first grade. Virtually all of these assessments are administered one-on-one, and the best ones are designed to be used repeatedly until the student achieves a specified level of mastery.

These early reading assessments are not identified explicitly as readiness tests, but that essentially is their purpose, because being able to read is critical to being ready to learn in the early elementary grades. All reading assessments are intended primarily to provide teachers and administrators with information to use in tailoring instruction to meet individual students' needs. Taken together, these assessments can reveal how many children are not prepared for first grade and may help measure schools' effectiveness in bringing these students up to speed. However, states have been reluctant to use the assessments to measure school effective-

HIPPY and Parents as Teachers

HIPPY (Home Instructional Program for Preschool Youngsters) is a home-based program designed to help parents provide educational enrichment for their preschool-age children. It focuses on children ages 3 to 5 and is aimed at parents who need assistance in teaching their children "school knowledge." HIPPY builds on the basic bond between parents and their children and works to help at-risk children succeed in school and, ultimately, in adult life.

HIPPY provides parents with easy-to-use activity packets and storybooks (available in both English and Spanish), home visits, and group meetings. Before they work on the activities with their children, parents practice with trained paraprofessionals. Parents and HIPPY staff attend group meetings every other week. The curriculum combines educational activities and play, as parents encourage their children to recognize shapes and colors, tell stories, follow directions, solve logical problems, and acquire other skills needed for school. Research has shown that children who participate in the program perform better in school than similar children who did not participate.

Developed in Israel in the 1960s, HIPPY has attracted wide support in the United States. Nine SREB states have at least one local site with a HIPPY program, and four states — Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana and Texas — have committed state funds to the program. Arkansas has the largest state-funded HIPPY program; the state spends $4 million to serve about 3,500 children. Louisiana and Texas each spend about $1 million, and each state's HIPPY program serves between 1,000 and 1,500 children. Florida allocates $750,000 to its HIPPY program, which serves 400 children.

Parents as Teachers, a parent support program similar to HIPPY, was developed in Missouri in response to a 1984 state law requiring all school districts to provide assistance for parents and children before the children start kindergarten. Parents as Teachers helps parents give their children a strong start and lay a foundation for success in school. For families with children age 3 and under, Parents as Teachers provides personal visits by certified parent educators; group meetings with other parents; information on what to look for as the child grows and develops; and periodic checks of the children's educational and sensory (vision and hearing) development. For families with children over age 3, Parents as Teachers helps to link parents with other early-childhood services and continues to sponsor special group programs and to check on the children's development. Research strongly suggests that Parents as Teachers, like HIPPY, has a positive impact on the academic performance of children who participate.

Parents as Teachers programs operate in every SREB state. Most of these programs are funded locally, but Delaware and Oklahoma provide state funds for Parents as Teachers programs. The Delaware program receives $834,000 per year and serves 1,200 families. The Oklahoma program has a $3 million budget and serves 6,100 families.

ness, because they don't want anything to interfere with teachers' objectivity in administering the assessments and using the results. (The 1999 SREB report *Reading Reform in the SREB States: Early Assessment* gives a more detailed description of reading assessment.)

Establish programs in 100 percent of the districts to help children who are not ready for first grade

States that have developed policies on early reading assessment — and even some that have not — provide professional development programs to instruct teachers in using and interpreting assessments and to help them build the necessary skills to meet the different needs of all children. Several states require schools to draft formal plans for helping children who have reading problems.

Florida requires schools to develop an academic improvement plan for every child who does not meet local standards in reading and/or math. This plan may include summer school, extra time during the school day and the suspension of all areas of the curriculum except reading, writing and math. In Oklahoma, schools must provide every student who does not read at grade level with a reading assessment plan. This plan outlines an intensive program that may include additional in-school instructional time as well as tutoring outside regular school hours and during the summer. Struggling students may not advance to the next grade level unless such plans are in place. Virginia schools that participate in the state's early-intervention reading initiative can receive supplemental funds to provide students who have reading problems with up to 2 1/2 hours per week of extra reading instruction at a 1-to-5 teacher/student ratio.

Individual schools and school systems in many SREB states have adopted Reading Recovery, an intensive one-on-one tutoring program, to help first-graders who have serious reading problems. Several states have allocated funds to help pay for this program. Some states — most notably Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas — are developing programs to provide schools with reading specialists who not only work with students to overcome serious problems but also help classroom teachers improve their ability to meet individual students' needs. (The SREB report *Teaching All Children to Read* identifies issues that states need to address in any comprehensive effort to improve reading achievement.)

States' new emphasis on early assessment and early intervention is in keeping with the findings presented in the SREB report *Getting Schools Ready for Children: The Other Side of the Readiness Goal,* which argued that readiness must apply to schools as well as to children. The fact that some children are not adequately prepared for school does not relieve schools of their responsibility to do their best for those children. The new assessment and intervention efforts in reading are designed to help prepare schools for that difficult job. Several states may develop similar models for early assessment and intervention in mathematics.

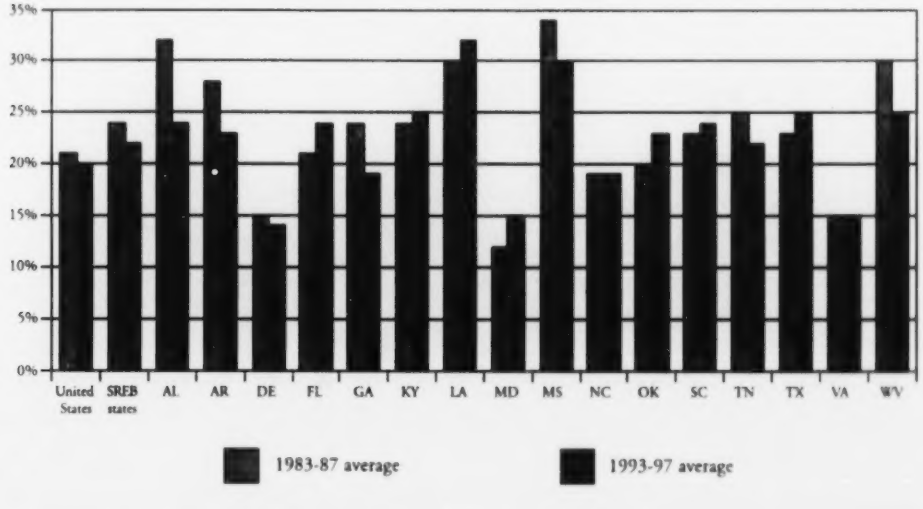
Readiness is more than a school problem

In 1988, when the Southern Regional Education Board adopted the goal of ensuring that all children are prepared for first grade, the focus was on developing the mental, social and physical skills that children need for school. There was recognition, however, that children who were homeless, hungry or unhealthy were unlikely to be prepared for success in school under any circumstances. In the last decade, states have paid increasing attention to ensuring that families and children have access to the health and social services they need.

The National Education Goals Panel assesses health measures to gauge states' progress toward improved school readiness. These health measures include adequacy of prenatal care, birth weights, immunizations and a "children's health index." However, the measure used most often to indicate both academic and nonacademic readiness for school is the percentage of children whose family incomes are below the poverty level. Poverty is linked to many conditions — such as inadequate health care, insufficient housing and a lack of reading materials in the home — that can imperil children's readiness for school.

Since the early 1980s, the national child-poverty level has remained at about 20 percent of all children. The SREB region's average has stayed about two percentage points higher, with individual states' figures ranging from 14 percent in Delaware to 32 percent in Louisiana. Since 1987, the child poverty rates in six states have declined by three percentage points or

Figure 4
Child Poverty Rates, 1983 to 1997



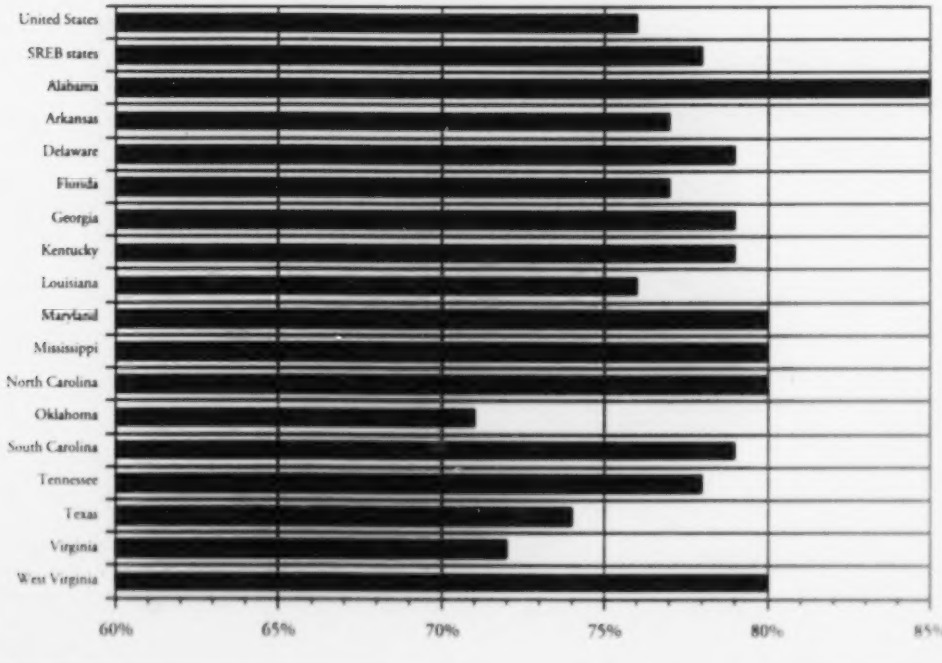
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

more, while rates have risen by at least three percentage points in four states. (Figure 4) The persistent problem of child poverty both regionally and nationally means that at least 20 percent of children are at risk for all sorts of problems related to poverty and that a similar number of families probably live marginally above the poverty level. Children in these "working poor" families face many of the same risks as those below the poverty level. In fact, their ineligibility for several subsidized services, such as Medicaid and free or reduced-price lunches, may put them at even greater risk.

One important development in children's health is the federal State Child Health Insurance Program. Every SREB state now has an approved plan for using this federal matching-funds program to expand the number of children who can receive subsidized health insurance either through expanded Medicaid eligibility, a separate state plan or a combination of the two methods. As enrollment in these programs grows, fewer children should arrive at school with health problems caused by inadequate care.

The percentage of children who have received all recommended immunizations is probably the most reliable indicator of whether their health needs have been met sufficiently before they begin school. The SREB states have been national leaders in this area. In 1997,

Figure 5
3-year-olds With All Recommended Immunizations, 1997



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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78 percent of children in the SREB region had received all recommended vaccinations by the time they were 3, compared with a national rate of 76 percent. Thirteen SREB states met or exceeded the national average, with SREB state figures ranging from 72 percent in Oklahoma to 85 percent in Alabama. (Figure 5)

The bad news is that 22 percent of the region's 3-year-olds — 300,000 children — have not received all recommended vaccinations. These children are vulnerable to diseases that are almost entirely preventable and that can affect not only their readiness for school but also their lives.

Build on success

The SREB region clearly has led the nation in developing programs to prepare children for school, but that success has not been distributed evenly among the SREB states. In six states — Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia — the numbers of 3- and 4-year-olds served by either Head Start or a state prekindergarten program are less than two-thirds of the numbers living in poverty. Only nine SREB states make kindergarten attendance mandatory, and only three require all children to attend full-day kindergarten. Five states do not make full-day programs available. The numbers of children who receive all recommended immunizations and are covered by health insurance are improving, but too many children remain vulnerable to preventable health problems.

It is much less costly to intervene early to help children with potential learning problems than to wait until later. Recent research on brain development clearly shows that there are certain "windows of opportunity" during which young children have the best chance to develop particular skills. These skills can be developed later, but they generally develop differently — and often less completely.

In providing programs to help improve children's readiness for school, states should recognize that program quality is essential to achieving the desired results. Not every state has standards for staff qualifications and staff/child ratios for its preschool program that are consistent with nationally recommended standards. It is important to maintain those standards in expanding programs, and high standards should be part of new programs. States must continue to ensure that program quality remains consistent while preserving a reasonable level of local control.

State policy-makers also should pay more attention to kindergarten. In states that do not have them, full-day kindergarten and mandatory attendance in kindergarten should be greater priorities than prekindergarten programs.

States also should pay more attention to ensuring that children receive adequate health care. Every child needs to be immunized to protect him or her from preventable diseases. States' new health-insurance programs for children can be a step in that direction, but only if states make serious efforts to ensure that eligible families participate.

Getting all children ready for first grade is complex and challenging, but the effort can have many far-reaching effects that go beyond improved student achievement. Effective school-readiness efforts can save states money on expenses — such as special education and the prison system — that increase when children get off to a poor start in education.

Improving children's readiness for school: How is your state doing?

Policy-makers who want to assess their states' efforts to prepare all children for first grade should ask several questions about key issues:

Prekindergarten and kindergarten programs —

- Is full-day kindergarten available to all 5-year-olds in the state?
- Are there enough spaces in Head Start and/or a state prekindergarten program to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds living in poverty?
- Are program standards for the state prekindergarten program high enough to ensure its quality?

Support for parents and families —

- Is the state helping parents of at-risk children to be more effective as their children's first teachers?
- Are prekindergarten and kindergarten programs required to involve parents in decisions about their children's education?
- Are educational, social and health services family-friendly, readily accessible and coordinated to ensure maximum effectiveness?

Assessment and early intervention —

- Are there appropriate assessment programs to ensure that all children with potential problems are identified by the time they begin first grade?
- Do these assessments provide information for teachers and administrators to use in making decisions about each child's needs?
- Are effective early-intervention programs available to help all children who are not ready to begin school?

Child health —

- Is enough being done to ensure that all children receive all recommended immunizations by age 3?
- Are there effective outreach programs to bring uninsured children into the new health-insurance programs for children?
- Do all children covered by Medicaid or other health-insurance programs for children have access to health care services?

Bottom line —

- Does the state emphasize cost-effective early-intervention programs for younger children as opposed to more costly, less effective remedial programs — and even incarceration — for older youths and adults?

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